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ABSTRACT

Philosophical and methodological differences exist regarding how best to instruct and encourage young children to read and write. In America, teaching reading and writing to young children has always been an area of controversy and debate, and it remains so today. The purpose of this digest is to review various studies and to identify essential elements of effective early literacy classroom instruction. The digest first discusses phonemic awareness instruction as a precursor for teaching reading and writing. It then considers the benefits of positive adult-child relationships and the necessity of a print-rich environment. The digest states that the early childhood curriculum should be filled with integrated language explorations and with reading and writing activities. It also suggests that teachers should vary teaching strategies according to children's needs. The digest concludes that when children are encouraged to learn independently, and when teachers, parents, and communities work together to build optimal environments for that learning, children's success in reading and writing can be expected. (NKA)

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Early Literacy Instruction: Research Applications in the Classrooms

By Chia-Hui Lin

Research overwhelmingly reveals that the early childhood years are the single most important period of time during which literacy development occurs in a person's life (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Slegers, 1996). However, philosophical and methodological differences exist regarding how best to instruct and encourage young children to read and write. Teaching reading and writing to young children in American has always been an area of controversy and debate (Teale & Yokota, 2000), and it remains so today. The purpose of this Digest is to review various studies and to identify essential elements of effective early literacy classroom instruction.

Phonics and Phonemic Awareness

According to the National Institute for Literacy (2001), phonemic awareness is the ability to think about and work with individual sounds in spoken languages. Before children learn to read, they need to be aware of how sounds work. Teachers should integrate phonemic awareness instruction in the curriculum to help children learn to read and spell. The instruction can start with having children categorize the first phonemes—the smallest functional unit of speech—in words and then progress to more complicated combinations. According to the National Reading Panel (2000) "Phonics skills must be integrated with the development of phonemic awareness, fluency, and text reading comprehension skills." Developing skill in blending and manipulating phonemes has been found to permit many children to develop strong reading abilities who were otherwise struggling.

Phonemic awareness can also be integrated into beginning writing instruction. While a child writes, the teacher can name the letters or comment about the strokes used to form the letters. When teachers take dictated messages from children, such as when writing a thank-you letter to a parent or guest, they can provide explicit demonstrations of phoneme segmentation. Note, however, there is no need to postpone children's functional writing until they all know the alphabet letters since many children develop strong writing skills simply through exposure to a print-rich environment (Schickedanz, 1998). Teachers should provide flexible writing experiences that allow young children to use scribble, random letters, or invented spelling in the beginning and over time move to more conventional forms (NAEYC, 1998; Teale & Yokota, 2000). When children write their own texts, they are also developing their vocabulary and phonemic awareness (Slegers, 1996).

Positive adult-child relationships

Young children's literacy learning benefits greatly from adults who are responsive to their interests and sensitive to their current level of language development (Slegers, 1996). During the infant and toddler years, children need many one-on-one interactions with caring adults to support their oral literacy development. Parents can talk to very young children and respond to their attempts to engage with simple language and frequent eye-contacts. Young children also need teachers to play with, talk with, sing to, and with whom to do finger plays and other learning games. In preschool, children need positive and nurturing relationships with teachers who can model reading and writing behaviors, engage in responsive conversations, and foster their interests in learning to read and write (NAEYC, 1998; Teale & Yokota, 2000).

A Print-Rich Environment

Children need materials to support their literacy development. When children have ready access to writing tools with which to express themselves in symbolic ways, they are motivated to learn and use literacy. Books, papers, writing tools, and functional signs should be visible everywhere in the classroom so that children can see and use literacy for multiple purposes. Children also engage in more reading and writing activities in print-rich environments (Slegers, 1996). For toddlers, teachers can provide simple art materials such as crayons, markers or papers for them to explore and manipulate. For preschoolers, teachers can draw children's attention to specific letters and words in the environment whenever it is appropriate. Besides accessible writing tools, children also need time to explore literacy. In the free-choice time period, children can engage in literacy-related play by sharing and sending messages to friends in a writing center. Creating menus for a restaurant, writing grocery lists, or making invitations to classroom events are examples of activities that can help children understand what readers and writers do before they actually acquire the skills necessary to read and write (NAEYC, 1998; Neuman, 1998; Teale & Yokota, 2000). When literacy is an integral part of their daily activities, children actively construct their own literacy knowledge and strategies and learn to read and write naturally and playfully (Teale & Yokota, 2000).

Integrated Language Explorations in the Curriculum

The early childhood curriculum should be intellectually engaging and challenging in a way that expands children's knowledge of the world and vocabulary. Investigating real topics or events that are meaningful to children should be a primary feature of the curriculum. When children investigate, they have opportunities to ask questions and use their literacy skills to explore their worlds. Teachers can establish time each day for students to present their thoughts in symbolic ways. Children can also work in small groups with peers having different skills so they can learn from each other. Most young children are eager to learn literacy when they discover that it is useful for exploring the environment and for communicating with others (NAEYC, 1998; Neuman, 1998).

Reading and Writing Activities

Listening to stories and discussing them are very important activities in early childhood classrooms (Slegers, 1996). For very young children, who normally have very short attention spans, story times work best when they are short (about 5-10 minutes) and conversational. Teachers can share cardboard books, nursery rhymes, books with photographs or drawings of animals, people, and brightly colored objects. Through these activities, children learn to focus their attention on words and pictures (Neuman & Bredekamp, 2000). In preschool, children need daily exposure to high quality books. Teachers can read books daily to individual children or to small groups of children; these readings should be from books that positively reflect children's identity, home language, and culture. In kindergarten and the primary grades, children also need to experience and engage in stories and informational texts daily. These activities foster children's vocabulary learning and comprehension skills (NAEYC, 1998; Neuman & Bredekamp, 2000; Teale & Yokota, 2000).

When reading to students of all ages, teachers should speak with inflection in order to convey meanings. Teachers may either stop and ask questions when they read the books or they can read an entire passage at once, thereby permitting students to enjoy the language and the rhythm of the book (Neuman, 1998). After readings, there should be opportunities for children to talk about what was read and to focus on the sounds and parts of language as well as the meaning of the book (NAEYC, 1998). Student response cards and group discussions followed by the retelling of a story using pictures or actual objects are effective devices for engaging students and enhancing their understanding of the stories they have read (Neuman, 1998). Background and contextual information regarding the literature being read is also useful for students' comprehension, vocabulary building and decoding. This can be provided through field trips, experiments, videos, or guest speakers (NAEYC, 1998; Schickedanz, 1998).

Students not only need to listen to books, they also need to have chances to read independently. Library corners need to be in the central part of the classroom with comfortable furniture that encourages children to read by themselves. Varying levels and varieties of reading materials, such as novels, biographies, informational books, magazines, and newspaper articles should be provided to broaden children's reading experiences. Good lighting and lively displays of readily accessible arrangements of books encourage children to stay in the library (Neuman & Bredekamp, 2000). Many teachers like to encourage children to do book talks about the materials they are reading, finding that this method significantly promotes conversations and reading interests among the children. Opportunities for children to read to audiences, including peers, parents, or even stuffed animals should be provided since this has been found to increase reading accuracy and fluency. Reading can also be a regular part of children's out-of-school time so that parents can be involved in supporting children's reading habits at home. When children have opportunities to experience various types of literature such as stories, informational texts, and poems, to respond to them through art, music, or dramatic activities, and to learn from lessons about comprehension strategies such as predicting and drawing inferences, they become more capable in processing written language and more familiar with language patterns and vocabulary (Neuman, 1998; Teale & Yokota, 2000).

Vary teaching strategies according to children's needs

In literacy-rich classrooms, some children are able to learn the skills and strategies necessary for reading and writing through engagement in meaningful activities. Finger plays, songs, poems, games, chants, and book listening and discussion all help children to pick up new vocabularies, understand the similarities and differences in language, and develop phonemic awareness (NAEYC, 1998; Neuman, 1998). However, it is important for teachers to adjust teaching strategies according to children's needs. Some children need explicit, direct instruction in order to master the task, and teachers must try to achieve balance between meaningful activities and skill practices (NAEYC, 1998; Neuman, 1998; Schickedanz, 1998; Teale & Yokota, 2000). Children may need to see or hear the alphabetic letters isolated from the context in order to better capture their shape and form (Neuman, 1998).

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If a child fails to make expected progress in literacy learning or if their literacy skills are advanced, teachers also need to prepare more individualized instructional strategies to meet the child's needs (NAEYC, 1998)

Conclusion

Learning to read and write is a critical achievement in life. Research reveals conclusively the link between early literacy and later academic and career success. To ensure that every child becomes a competent reader and writer is a responsibility shared by teachers, families and communities. The role of educators in early literacy instruction is to teach basic skills and to provide rich, meaningful, engaging learning environments supported by appropriate teaching practices. Each child comes to the classroom with different literacy experiences and abilities, and teachers need to consider each child's needs and to provide balanced programs with explicit instruction and meaningful reading and writing tasks (Slegers, 1996). When children are encouraged to learn independently, and when teachers, parents and communities work together to build optimal environments for that learning, children's success in reading and writing can be expected (NAEYC, 1998; Neuman, 1998; Schickedanz, 1998).

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